

Dad was born in 1923  
so these years he was 23-33 years of age

June, 1997

*"You fed us chicken necks."*

Your mom, I and your uncle Henry owned virtually nothing when we arrived on June 18, 1949 in the United States, by boat. I do not remember exactly what we carried with us, but I would be surprised if your mom and I had more than one change of clothing and more than one pair of shoes. On board we were each given \$5 and I spent about \$2 in the boat's commissary for chocolate, which we had not seen for years. And, I'm ashamed to admit, I also bought a pack of cigarettes for 25 cents. So, your mom and I entered the US with a total of about \$8, between the two of us. This is the only money that we ever got without working for it.

We made up our minds that we'll never accept handouts from anybody. This included our brother Kurt, the only relative we had in the US, who by-the-way never even offered any help. It also included the Jewish relieve organization that brought us to this country, and any agency of the US government. We stuck to this, even through the first extremely difficult ten years, and of course ever after.

Within less than 2 weeks of our arrival both your mom and I had found jobs and were working. So did Henry, who was single until his fiancé Margaret arrived here about 3 years later. Henry and I earned minimum wages at our jobs. Your mom earned almost twice as much, working as a skilled sewing machine operator for furniture upholstery.

Your mom worked in the downtown section of Manhattan on Mott Street, for the Bibbi Company, an importer and restorer of antiques and furniture. I got my job through the help of one of Lizzy's cousins. Herby was a foreman at Universal Camera Corporation on 23rd Street, west of 6th Avenue. He got me a job as a production repair operator at this manufacturer of low-cost 35-mm cameras. Henry first worked for a lamp manufacturer but soon joined me at the Universal Camera Corporation, where working conditions were better.

For the first year and a half we lived in a rooming house in upper Manhattan, on west 90th Street. We rented week-by-week a furnished room with a small kitchen. The community bath room was off the corridor nearby. Henry rented a smaller furnished room without kitchen, right next door to us on the same floor of the rooming house. Later, when our friends Charlotte and Richard arrived, about a year after we had come to America, we got a room with kitchen for them in a rooming house next to the one we lived in.

Your mom got pregnant with our first baby right after we landed in New York. She kept working as long as her employer permitted it. She got to work using public transportation. In crowded (and unfriendly) New York this was no pleasure for a pregnant women, especially toward the end of her pregnancy. The brunt of the hardships landed on her shoulders. Besides working at a demanding job she kept house, cooked for the three of us and washed by

hand our clothes and linens, when necessary boiling them in a pot on her kitchen stove top. Laundromats were not invented yet, and even if they would have existed we would not have had the money to take advantage of them. After Evelyn arrived your mom had the added chore of washing diapers since we could not afford to take a diaper service, as was the custom at that time, before the introduction of paper diapers.

I realized that with your mom having to stop work shortly before Evelyn's arrival my salary, even after getting a small raise, could not support us. I knew that something had to be done. Applying for social welfare support from the State, or from the Jewish agency, was out of the question. I decided, the only legal way to earn more money was to go into my own business.

Henry and I tossed around the following idea: We will make more money by going into our own business repairing photographic equipment. We did not just grab this idea out of thin air but based it on factors, which we had thoroughly researched:

1. Before the war all better cameras sold in the US were imported from Germany.
2. The German manufacturers of such famous brands as Leica, Exacta, Rolleiflex and others were in total disarray after Germany was defeated and occupied by the allies.
3. The import and service departments of these German manufacturers in America were disbanded as soon as America declared war on Germany.
4. Uncounted thousands of expensive German cameras were at that time unsupported and many had not been used for some time. Many of these cameras were not properly stored during the war years and needed maintenance and repair.

We visited several large photo stores and talked with the owners. They all told us that they were looking for competent repair contractors and that they would do business with us. We also noted that in the yellow pages for Manhattan there were more than 40 photographic stores listed. Additional photographic stores could be found in the other boroughs of New York. At that time we only found two camera repair shops listed in Manhattan and only one in the Bronx.

German cameras have mechanisms which are comparable in size and complexity to larger pocket watches or mechanical wind-up clocks. We reasoned that probably most of the non-operating cameras just needed a proper cleaning of their mechanisms plus, maybe some lubrication and small adjustments, to make them work properly again. We also reasoned that with some diligence we could teach ourselves to service these cameras. Since their purchase prices averaged above \$100 and their rarity at that time made them even more valuable, we should be able to charge a good price for our services. It turned out that our predictions were in general correct.

But we had no capital and no business experience. Our only strength was that we had lots of guts. Right from the outset we agreed that I would go into this venture alone. Henry would be a "silent partner". He kept his full-time day job and came evenings and weekends to the shop, helping in the business. I fully realized that my knowledge of the language and of US law and business customs was very weak. We needed an American partner. Fortunately we were able to convince a coworker at the factory to come with us, full-time, into this venture as a one-third partner. He had a business degree from N.Y.U. and he was born in New York. This of course was Max, my friend who now lives in Santa Rosa.

How do you start a new business, acquire machinery, spare parts inventory and do the required advertising without any capital? You work 18 hours a day, 7 days per week and take practically no salary.

Your mom had stopped bringing a salary home shortly before Evelyn was born in April 1947. For a time it got financially so tight that some times there was not enough money to buy a quart of milk for Evelyn. Your mom bought a glass of milk for 10 cents in the luncheonette instead. This actually happened.

Our living standard improved considerably in November 1947 after Kurt found an apartment for us on 27th Street, east of 4th Avenue. At that time to find an apartment in New York City was considered as close to a miracle as you would ever get. The apartment was in an old 4-story building, one flight up, just above Kurt's little electrician's store. There was a kitchen with a pantry. The kitchen had room for a kitchen table but was to small to eat in. There also was a good sized dining room with a window into a ventilation shaft. Then there were two small and dark bedrooms and a bathroom, all with windows into a ventilation shaft, admitting air but hardly any light. Finally we had a large living room with two windows looking out on 27th Street. The place was quite run down and needed a good scrubbing and a coat of paint, which we took care off immediately. The rent was reasonable.

Henry lived with us. He slept on a couch in the dining room and contributed to cover his part of the rent and food.

We gladly moved in. This was very much better than the furnished rooming house. But we had no furniture, no linens and blankets, no cooking utensils, so forth. With our very limited income we had to be very careful in shopping for all we needed and for our daily food.

The most necessary furniture we bought, as we could afford them, at the Salvation Army bargain center. We had already bought, while in the rooming house, the required dishes and flatware at Woolworth, namely three of each plates, cups, forks, knives and so forth. For bedding and linens we now made trips on Sundays to the Canal Street Neighborhood, New York's downtown Jewish section. There most merchandise were "seconds" and were sold from push carts, at prices that were much lower than in regular stores, but still barely affordable for us. Your mom insisted to buy remnants of material which she converted into curtains, drapes and other things, making our ever so humble apartment livable and neat.

For making business deliveries I took a suit case full of cameras onto the bus or the subway train and delivered and picked up work from photo stores, several times each week. In 1948 we bought an old army surplus Jeep. It had been converted to a station wagon by some previous owner who had added a wooden box instead of the rear seats. None of us three had a drivers license. Even Max, my American partner did not have one. We employed Egon (Lizzy's brother), who was a taxi-driver in New York City, to do the deliveries.

In March 1949 Shirley arrived. She was born in New York's Beth Israel hospital, same as Evelyn. Again we had no health insurance but were able to scrape together the money for the gynecologist and the hospital costs. Also we bought a washing machine on credit, our first major non-business acquisition in the US. It cost about as much as the diaper service would have cost us for a year. Washing machines were comparatively more expensive in 1949, than they are now.

Even after several years in business the money crunch actually did not ease much. Some month it looked as if the profits were there, but as it goes, then came some setback and again there was hardly sufficient income to pay the salaries of the few employees and they naturally come first, before the "partners." Hans Vertun, who was still going to N.Y.U. for his doctorate in psychology, was our part-time bookkeeper.

Also in March 1949, right after Shirley was born, Henry's wife Margaret arrived from Austria. They moved to their own apartment. Henry continued to come evenings and some weekends to the shop. But he now worked as a paid part-time employee. Besides Max, my partner and me, we employed on the average three full time mechanics, a delivery person (Egon) and several part time employees.

Around the middle of 1951 Max got cold feet. As tax time rolled around we did not have the cash to send-in the tax withholdings from our employees salaries. He feared the IRS will throw as all into jail. He relinquished his partnership and he took off for Santa Rosa, California. I guess Henry did not feel like a partner anymore, after his wife's arrival. Anyway, he did not offer to share in the losses when the business finally failed. But then, I never discussed that with him either.

Around that time, by the middle of 1951, the landlord of our New York apartment got more and more impatient. Coincidentally our friends Charlotte and Richard had just moved to a new garden apartment complex in Bayside, Long Island. And the big news was that upon signing a 3 year lease the new tenant was given 3 month free rent concession. We jumped at this opportunity and moved to the spanking new three bedroom, one bath garden apartment in Bayside. Living rent free for three month allowed us to pay up the rent we owed to the old landlord in New York City. Life was much better in Long Island. Especially for the two children. There was plenty of fresh air and loads of other children to play with. And in 1953 your mom was blessed again, pregnant with another baby.

But business at the camera repair shop was dismal. The first rush of the penned-up demand for servicing foreign-made photo equipment had subsided. Competition from returning

GI's (trained in schools paid for by the government) made the business tougher. The country experienced the first postwar recession. Many marginal businesses failed. In August 1953 one of my larger clients bankrupted, owing me a large sum of money for services that we had performed. I defaulted on the payments on the car and it was repossessed. I was tired of carrying such a demanding business on my shoulders and decided to close the business after almost 7 years of struggle. The machines, the furniture and the parts inventory were sold at auction. The proceeds covered most, but not all the debts of the business.

Charlotte and Richard lived nearby in the same garden apartment complex and were aware of our problems. They graciously lend us some money to tie us over this bad period. This loan was free of interest and I repaid it as soon as I obtained a permanent job.

The search started for "a way to make a living". I sold Fuller Brush products. However I just did not have the guts to peddle door-to-door, so I gave it up after a few month of trying. Same for selling fire alarm systems for Dictograph Corp. I decided that door-to-door selling was not my cup-of-tea.

In early 1954 I found a job as a production service operator for Reco-Cut Corp. I made a few suggestions for the improvement of some procedures. I understood that to be an important part of the job. I promptly got fired by the foreman who thought I was trying to get his job.

May 13, 1954 was a very lucky day for us. Barry was born in the Terrace Heights hospital, a small private hospital near Jamaica Estates in Queens, Long Island. With two girls and a boy (!) our family was complete. This also was the day that my application for a well-paying job was accepted. I was going to work as a model maker for a defense contractor, building prototypes of aerial cameras. I was able to give these good news to your mom as she came out of the delivery room.

Since I had to learn the trade I did a lot of unreported overtime, but we were quite happy, for about 7 month. Then the ax fell. I could not obtain the required security clearance. I was told: "Because your wife has a bunch of close relatives living behind the Iron Curtain (in Poland)." But at least now I had an industrial background and excellent recommendations from the defense contractor, making the search for a new job much easier.

A couple of weeks later, in November of 1955 I was hired by Mergenthaler Linotype Corp. as a research engineer. Within the first weeks of this employment I solved a problem in the development of their new photo-typesetting system by inventing a complex lens assembly. This lead to my first important patent and eventually to an ever increasing level of financial compensation. It was a real turning point in our life. Many satisfying and ever better paying jobs followed.

A few weeks after I started working at Mergenthaler in Brooklyn I found an additional evening job. I started working as a night-school instructor for the New York Institute of Photography, a trade school in downtown Manhattan. Four times a week, after finishing my day-

time work , I took the subway train from Brooklyn to lower Manhattan and instructed a three hour course in Photographic Equipment Maintenance and Repair (PE-M/R) at the Institute. Monday through Thursday I left home at 7 in the morning and did not get back until around 11 at night.

In the spring of 1956 we started to look for a house of our own. We picked Westbury, a little farther out in Long Island (longer commute to work), mostly because of the good schools and because we liked the new houses that were built there.

The house that we finally settled on had a cost of about 2.5 times my annual salary at Mergenthaler. It required a 20% downpayment, due at closing of the escrow. The 20% downpayment amounted to about a half years after-tax salary on my day-time job.. But we had no savings! Fortunately the builder only started with the actual construction after we signed the contract in August 1956, and closing of the escrow, after the house would be finished, was set for June 1957. So we had about 9 month to come up with the downpayment.

We were always careful with our money, but we really went into a rigid regime of saving during this period. Even today we are still surprised at the discipline that we had and our ability to accumulate this considerable sum of money in such a short time. Actually we put most of the salary of my day-time job in the bank and lived mostly on what I made in my second, night-time job.

Even after we got the downpayment together and moved into the house we had to deny ourselves many little and not so little amenities, managing our income to buy all the necessities of a first house.

Actually I only remember a single incident where you children noticed that we just could not afford to spend as freely as most of your friend's parents. I think you remember it too. It was Christmas of 1958. We really could not afford many presents, but Barry, who was 4 years old, had been wishing for a particular toy. When there where only very few packages under the tree (and we always had one) and this toy was missing, he cried bitterly. So off we went, at 10 PM on Christmas Eve, to Modell's Market and I bought the toy - Barry was happy and the evening was saved.

All this is now a long time ago. I think that we were generally happy, even if fate had handed us a rotten deck of cards.